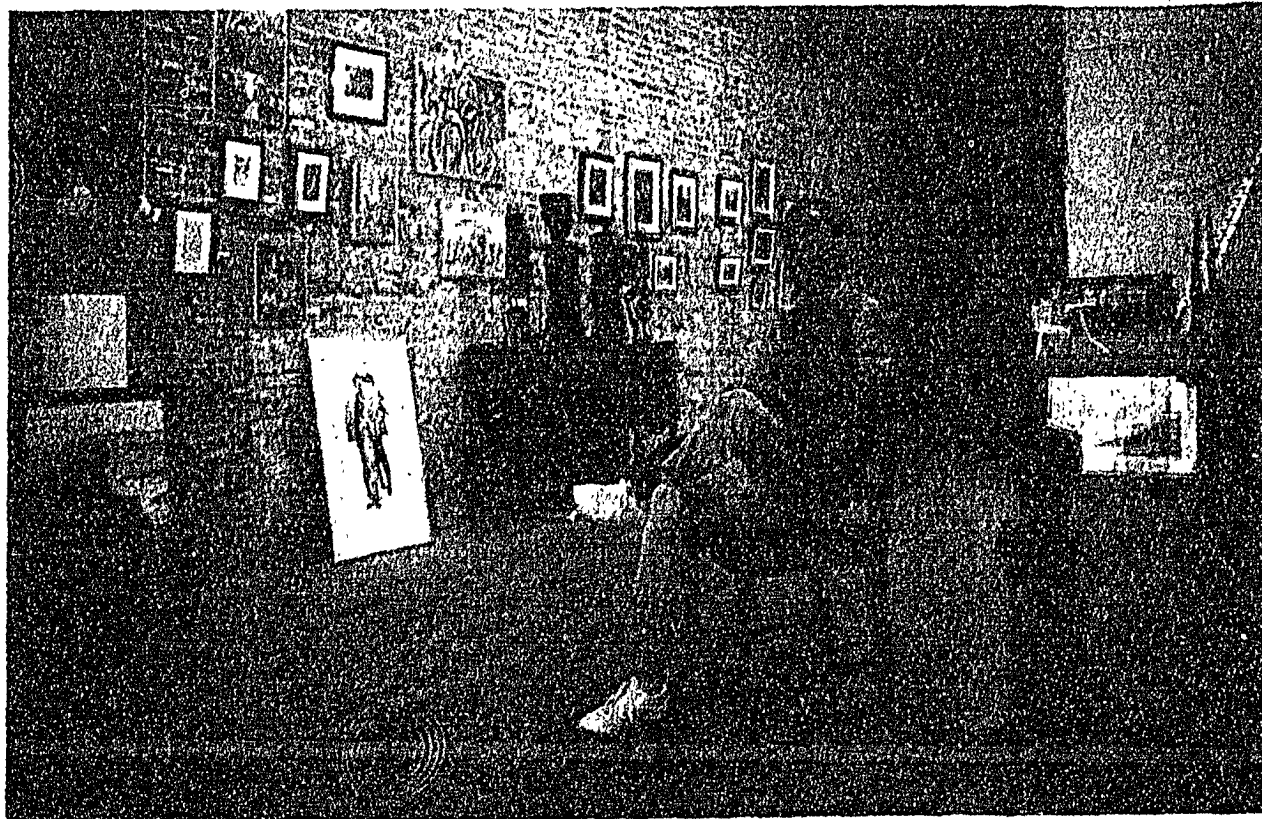




Robert Torrence with his portrait of the boxing champion Jack Johnson.

The Sun/Clarence B. Garrett



The Sun/Irving H. Phillips, Jr.

Eugene Coles's Last Word Gallery shows work by black and white artists. A previous gallery, displaying black artists, failed for lack of support.

Black artists: Baltimore's been good for them, they say—but it could be better

By Henry Scapura

BLACK artists who live here give Baltimore mixed reviews.

While acknowledging that art isn't an easy profession for anyone, they contend that black artists have a harder time of it because of the way their work is perceived. Even as they say this, many black artists concede the situation has improved in recent years.

Joshua Johnston, one of the first black artists of note in this country, made his mark in Baltimore in the early Nineteenth Century, painting the portraits of wealthy slave-owners. The intervening century virtually slammed the door on local blacks who wanted to be sculptors and painters. Today, however, black artists have become an indisputable presence in the city's art scene, not only because of their numbers — estimated conservatively at 75 or 80 — but because of their output and the quality of their work.

Their murals add color to once-drab city walls and their sculptures and paintings enliven schools and other public buildings. Black artists contributed significantly to this year's Artscape. Their work has been exhibited extensively by the city's Gallery 409, part of the Eubie Blake Cultural Center, drawing nearly 20,000 visitors a year. The current Maryland Art Place show, "Urban Journals," features black artists exclusively, five of them from Baltimore. All this adds up to unusual ferment.



The Sun/Richard Childress

Joyce Scott wears a necklace of her own design.

"The city is very supportive of its artists," says Leslie King Hammond, dean of the graduate school at the Maryland Institute, College of Art and a close observer of the local art scene. "One of the most important developments has been the growth of public art: in parks, in schools, on walls, on billboards. This has forced the artist out of the traditional mode [of relying on private collectors for sales], which threatens his survival, and into the community which appreciates his art and is willing to support it."

"Because of the changing mood toward art, corporations are calling on artists as they're erecting new buildings to help them enhance the environment. Black artists are getting more and more of these commissions."

Aissatou Mijiza, curator of the MAP show and a former Philadelphia, came to Baltimore five years ago to study at the Maryland Institute, and stayed.

"Baltimore is mid-point between

New York and Washington," she says of her decision, "and it's easily accessible. Living here is not too expensive and there's plenty of studio space."

She praises Gallery 409 and MAP for encouraging relatively unknown artists and avant-garde artists by showing work that commercial galleries ordinarily reject.

See ARTISTS, D10, Col. 4

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Harold Smith, also a Philadelphian, now doing graduate work at the Maryland Institute and currently exhibiting at the MAP show, finds Baltimore to be a good testing ground for his art.

"New York may be the center of the art world," he says, "but you don't have to live there to produce art. This is a good place to get your legs steady and see what you can do. Baltimore has been very good to me in terms of showing my work. I've had a lot of opportunities."

Showing in a non-commercial gallery, however, is not the same as selling. Black artists have considerably less luck in being accepted by Baltimore's commercial galleries. Although the more successful artists occasionally exhibit and attract buyers in New York and Washington, most probably sell their work privately on the home scene.

"Many galleries don't know what to do with the works of black artists," Dr. Hammond explains, "because it's so different. It's often political or social, and it doesn't fit into any easy categories."

According to Ray Harris, art instructor at Coplin State College and a painter, the white art establishment commonly prejudices the work of blacks, imposing limitations on those artists.

"Only in America are we called black artists," he says. "The French look on us simply as artists. By that label white curators and gallery owners segregate us. When they hear black artist, they immediately assume he paints sad-faced black kids and nothing else."

He recalls seeing whites admire a painting for its qualities until they learned it was done by a black artist. At that point they felt compelled to seek out elements within it that placed it in a black context.

Joyce Scott, creator of soft sculpture and one of the few black artists in the city to support herself entirely by her art, puts it this way: "If I do a big vacuum cleaner, it's got to be from a maid's point of view. If Claes Oldenburg [the father of soft art] does it, it's something else. Much of the time my personal history isn't that powerfully linked with what I do. I'm not locked into any one ethnicity."

"It's a battle to break out of that preconceived mold, not for me personally as a thinker but definitely to show my work. It's hard to show outside an Afro-American context — although, unlike some artists, I don't mind all-black shows."

Robert Torrence, who has been painting here for the last 30 years and is represented in the current MAP show, hasn't had much luck with local galleries.

"People say to me, 'You're one of the top black artists,'" he notes. "But that says to me that, if there's a list of white artists around, my name is probably on the bottom. That attitude affects the way people go about buying the art of Afro-American artists."

Black commercial galleries have not been especially successful in Baltimore. Dr. Hammond speculates they've seldom had enough money to sustain them over slack periods. Eugene Coles, an artist also in the current MAP show and owner of the Last Word Gallery on North Charles street, opened his first gallery in 1975. Aimed primarily at black buyers, he showed only the works of black artists. It closed after a year. He finds the format of the present gallery, featuring both black and white artists and catering to the broad public, more viable.

An exception to the rule is the gallery of the non-profit Black American Museum on Carswell street. Although it carries original art work, most of its sales consist of commercial art, mainly inexpensive reproductions of black subject matter. The museum, which is supported by dues-paying members, plans to open an additional gallery on North

avenue late next month, according to curator Berkeley Thompson.

Ray Harris believes the black community will have to start supporting black artists if those artists are ever to achieve full acceptance.

"The average white buyer," he reflects, "neglects art done by black people because he thinks it's a poor investment, not a sure bet. So it's the black investor who's going to have to place a premium on our art. When that happens, values will trickle up."

Perhaps because the black middle class attained affluence so much later than its white counterpart, most blacks have not placed a high value on buying and owning original art.

"Whereas a good part of the black community has the wherewithal to buy cars, television sets, stereos and the other accoutrements that go with their status," Dr. Hammond says, "they still have a hard time recognizing the part art should play in their lives."

It's difficult to summarize what black artists here are doing because they are creating just about everything white artists are creating, informed by a black sensibility.

"Black artists everywhere are combining a multiplicity of esthetics," Ms. Mejza explains. "They're taking from this art movement and that, from historical developments all over the art world — African, Western, Eastern. They're borrowing from any discipline, any motif, wherever their creative sensibilities take them. Artists are combining whatever imagery is significant to them to create their individual vision."

Dr. Hammond describes the results as of "incredibly good quality." Mr. Coles, the gallery owner, ranks most black artists here 8 on a scale of 10 for artistic ability.

If black artists feel they have a way to go before achieving full recognition by the white world, they can at least point to the distance they've traveled.

When Morgan State's James Lewis was a youngster in the Thirties aspiring to become an artist, the number of black artists coming out of Baltimore could be counted on one hand. Elton Fax, born here, had to go to New York to survive as an illustrator.

No local art school at the time would accept blacks and young Mr. Lewis had to seek his training up North. Through a system of "enlightened" segregation, the state of Maryland paid his expenses through graduate school.

With almost three years of the Marine Corps under his belt, he came to Morgan State in 1950, full of daring plans. In that first year he organized a show of the works of the late Hale Woodruff, a leading black artist, followed by an African cultural festival. There had been nothing quite like it. The closest thing was a 1939 exhibition of contemporary black artists at the Baltimore Museum of Art, hailed as the first ever in a southern region.

The African festival in particular shook people up, with black students laughing uneasily during a film series on African dance because it all seemed so remote from their own lives.

"People weren't wearing dashikis in 1951," Dr. Lewis says, looking back. "One senior professor came up to me and asked sternly, 'Young man, are you suggesting there's some connection between us here in Baltimore and those Africans?'"

Under Dr. Lewis's leadership, Morgan State instituted courses on Afro-American art and traditional African art, and established an arts major. Along with this the department began amassing an art collection, stressing traditional African pieces and the works of Afro-American artists. It has now grown to more than 600 items.

Until the Maryland Institute and other schools began accepting black students, Morgan was the only school in the state where blacks could obtain professional art training. Many black artists working today in Baltimore and elsewhere were educated there.

Despite the drawbacks, black artists as a whole seem confident they'll beat the game. Ray Harris is speaking for more than himself when he comments, "Because of his talent and commitment, I'm certain the black artist will be mainstreamed into the major art markets of America in more than token numbers. Because I believe this, I'm totally involved in developing my skills and in the discovery of myself."